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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ASHGABAT 001589

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [TX](#)
SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: ELECTION PREPARATIONS IN BALKAN
PROVINCE

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Richard M. Miles. Reasons 1.4 (B)
and (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: During a pre-election visit to two cities in Balkan province, poloff met with two groups of election officials eager to answer questions and show-off their preparations for election day. Each of the 11 seats in the province are contested by two or three candidates. The candidates themselves represented a range of interest groups and professions. Nearly one quarter of the candidates are women. Among the social organizations that nominated candidates, the selection process varied somewhat, but all seemed to share at least some elements of openness and popular support. Campaigning itself is low-key, usually involving joint meetings with voter groups at which candidates answer questions. Media coverage consists of candidate information published in the provincial newspaper and limited local television coverage. All candidates get equal access to publicity. Two and a half weeks before the election, polling stations were largely in place and polling station workers had already sent first notices to registered voters. As the first Turkmen elections open to foreign observers, it was clear that officials were making a conscientious effort to show that elections would be conducted in compliance with Turkmen law. END SUMMARY.

ALL SEATS CONTESTED, ONLY TWO INCUMBENTS

12. (C) On November 25, poloff met with four members of the provincial election commission (PEC) of Balkan Province, an area that borders on the Caspian Sea, to discuss local preparations for the upcoming December 14 Mejlis (parliamentary) elections. There are 11 electoral districts in Balkan province, each of which will elect its own Mejlis deputy. Among the eleven districts, three seats each have three candidates, while the remaining eight seats are contested by two candidates each. Two of the 25 candidates are incumbents, and six are women. Although there is a provision in the election law for independent candidates, there were no independents in Balkan. Each of the candidates were nominated by a mass organization, which in turn is a member of the Galkynysh (Revival) national movement. According to the commission members, Galkynysh works as a "family" to insure that the interests of all groups -- women, youth, veterans, etc. -- coincide. They clarified that any social organization registered with the Ministry of Justice

can nominate a candidate, for example, the Red Crescent Society.

CANDIDATES PICKED AT OPEN MEETINGS

13. (C) According to the PEC members, candidates were picked at open meetings that were held at the various organizations. No candidates volunteered and it was explained that it would be viewed as immodest to propose one's own candidacy. Rather, candidates were nominated at the meetings based on factors such as experience, especially legal and economic, knowledge and public confidence that they would do a good job. A PEC member explained that at the nomination meetings, many attendees sat and thought that perhaps they would be nominated. After the nominees were named, the attendees voted to decide who would be the organization's candidate. The process was orderly and people did not sit all night voting. The district election commissions in Balkan province accepted all proposed candidates. No candidates were rejected.

LOW KEY CAMPAIGNING

14. (C) Prior to the recent electoral reform, each polling station served up to 3,000 people, versus a maximum 2,000 voters currently. The city of Balkanabat has three electoral districts. Campaigning takes place through candidate meetings with voters. The candidates only appear jointly, insuring equal access to meetings. The provincial newspaper had already published candidate information, which included

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the candidate's photo, biographical information and platform. The candidates' meetings with voters would also be broadcast on the provincial television channel during regular news programs and special, election-related programs. The PEC members assured poloff that all candidates have equal campaign resources, "not like in the United States where some candidates have more or less" than others.

IMPROVEMENT OVER SOVIET ELECTIONS

15. (C) When asked for a comparison with Soviet-era elections, a PEC member said that during Soviet elections, the voters did not know anything about the candidates. They were just presented with a list of candidates that came from above without any biographical information or platform. She suggested that the situation is much better now because "people know their neighbors better than Moscow knew them." Continuing, she said that, compared with the USSR, Turkmenistan can do more for itself nowadays. "Previously, Moscow had all the factories and built everything for itself. Now everyone sees what there is in the country. That is democracy, independence, and it influences every person." Before they always waited for something from above. Now, she said, they do for themselves. The PEC members also emphasized the role that elders play in Turkmen society. The Halk Maslahty (People's Council), will still have a role. (Note: The People's Council was stripped of its power in the new constitution. End Note) One PEC member compared Turkmen citizens to a son who does what the father asks without questioning, "That is the Turkmen character."

EVERYTHING READY AT POLLING STATIONS

16. (C) Poloff visited six polling stations in Balkanabat, the capital of Balkan province. Signs in both Turkmen and Russian were already mounted around the entrances to polling stations throughout the city. Most stations were almost completely set up with voting booths and tables in place, voter lists posted, copies of the election law and election documents available and working telephones. At stations located in buildings with a lot of people passing through, the polling station items were stored in an adjacent room until closer to election day. All polling places had transparent voting urns. Polling station committees were in

charge of distributing election "invitations" to the homes of all voters, both three weeks before the election and again three-four days before the election.

THE CANDIDATES' VIEWS

17. (C) Poloff met three candidates for seats in Balkanabat. Two of the three were competing for the same seat. They were an administrator in the provincial government, nominated by the Democratic Party; the deputy director of a bank, nominated by the Veterans' Society; and a gas company engineer, also nominated by the Democratic Party. The administrator said he knew the city well due to his work and had expressed interest in running to the Democratic Party, of which he was a member. 50-60 people supported his candidacy.

The gas engineer mentioned that he'd been supplying gas to homes for 30 years and was known by a lot of people. Their campaign activities had consisted of preparing their biographies and platforms for publication. They had held only one joint meeting with voters at that time. They said their meetings with voters would not be debates, but rather an opportunity to answer questions from the voters. They had no schedule of future voter meetings, saying it would depend on voter interest. They were all interested in social and economic questions, particularly the improvement of the standard of living. One candidate mentioned that, as Turkmenistan moves towards the international economic system, they would need to protect their national interests.

18. (C) According to the candidates, there is great voter interest in the election, more than for previous elections. In order to deliver social services and provide guarantees,

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there need to be appropriate laws. It would not be enough for a deputy to just say that something is needed, but they must also provide the laws that would make it happen. In addition to creating new laws, a candidate emphasized that, as a result of the new constitution, the responsibility of the Mejlis would be greater. Deputies would be able to accomplish more. Their role would be to further develop national policy, particularly economic questions. The candidates did not see a difference between local and national policy priorities.

HOW THE DISTRICT ELECTION COMMISSION WAS SELECTED

19. (C) The following day, poloff met with members of the district election commissions (DEC) in the port city of Turkmenbashi. The city has two election districts, each with two candidates. There are ten polling stations in each district. The two candidates in the 36th district are women, one a lawyer nominated by the Women's Union, the other the editor of the newspaper published by the oil refinery, a Democratic Party nominee. In the 37th district, the candidates were nominated by the youth organization and the trade union. The DEC members explained that the DEC chairman was selected at a meeting attended by representatives of all the social organizations. At that meeting, various organizations proposed candidates for the position of DEC chairman. The winner, a youth union member, had already worked on the DEC for three years. There were also representatives from the Democratic Party and the Trade Union nominated for the chairmanship. The decision was made by vote. Following his election, the DEC chairman attended a seminar in Balkanabat, the provincial capital. At the end of October, the DEC was formed, consisting of 11 members and one deputy chairman. Each social organization proposed one DEC member.

110. (C) Regarding the election, no independent candidates came forth during the prescribed period. The DEC chairman explained that since he was a youth union member, it would be a conflict for the youth union to also nominate a candidate in the district. In choosing a candidate, the youth union had conducted a joint meeting with the trade union in order

to nominate a candidate. In their case, there were preliminary talks within the organizations to pick a candidate, after which that person was confirmed at the joint meeting. The DEC chairman added that, in the past, some people have proposed their own candidacy at these meetings. Candidates had been consulted in advance about their interest in running -- "they were not just ordered," he said.

¶11. (C) In Turkmenbashy, no candidate meetings with voters had taken place two and a half weeks before the elections. The DEC chairman said the candidates were still preparing, but that it was possible that they would hold several meetings per day. The DEC could organize candidate meetings with voters, or groups of voters could request meetings themselves. Candidate meetings with voters could be either joint or only one candidate. DEC members said joint meetings have the advantage of allowing voters to compare the candidates' answers, respective worldviews and programs. DEC members said there are only national television broadcasts in Turkmenbashy, so there would be no television coverage of local candidates. Candidates prepared their own platforms, with the advice of "experienced people."

¶12. (C) COMMENT: Officials were open and willing to answer any questions. They welcomed poloff's presence, saying that interest in the elections shown by a foreigner would highlight the importance of the elections for locals. It seemed apparent that from a technical point of view, the elections should be able to take place in compliance with Turkmen election law. The candidates themselves seemed to represent a variety of backgrounds and social groups and, in the absence of a multi-party system, nonetheless reflected a degree of pluralism. END COMMENT.
MILES